

Opinion Articles



Narrative of a fine day: Calabrian mafia and the appropriation of violence in south Italy

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It was dawn, and the city was asleep when the picciotti (emissaries) decided to act; a sign that they wanted to avoid any massacre. Their intention was rather to provoke damage and to launch an unmistakable and devastating message. How else could the device triggered in front of the offices of the General Attorney of Reggio Calabria be explained? A simple device, assembled though by professional hands. A device which could have the potential, in the case that it fully exploded, to destroy the exteriors of all the offices in Cimino Street.

This is how the article featured on La Repubblica introduces the bomb explosion at the offices of the General Attorney of Reggio Calabria on the 4th of January 2010. Behind the bombing is suspected to be the 'Ndrangheta; the Calabrian mafia. The first article that covers the event is carefully articulated. Before any description of the facts some powerful statements are offered. *The city was asleep... a sign that they did not want to kill anyone... professionals assembled the bomb but it did not fully explode... the 'Ndrangheta communicates rather than violates human lives.* Ambivalence then as to the interpretation of the event sets a particular mood from the beginning of a string of articles that cover the facts that follow.

In the articles of the same day (04/01/2010) we read that *the 'Ndrangheta raises the bar against the magistrates of the city... especially against the work of judges who have seized large assets from local criminals... the political world and the Quirinale (Presidential Palace) immediately expressed their solidarity with the judges.*

On the 07/01/2010, the story continues that *fear is spread in Reggio Calabria after the discovery of the explosive device... which however may be a remnant of the New Year celebration... but the case needs further investigation.*

On 08/01/2010 we read that *the one ('Ndrangheta) who was considered the 'perfect' amongst the mafias is starting to get scared... those who ruled in silence now need the bombs... those who up until now have reigned unchallenged now no longer seem so cool in controlling Calabria.* The prelude continues with rhetorical proclamations of the type: *with this attack the 'Ndrangheta tests the water... the bomb at the Attorney's offices has the smell of negotiation, the 'Ndrangheta now discovers how far the war against her will go... this is a clear reaction to the hardest blows that the state has dealt them in recent months.*

Despite the high publicity of the attack, everyday people of Reggio Calabria appear very sceptical. It has been suggested that the apparent novice of the attack, as is featured in the relevant video also published on La Repubblica, makes the involvement of the 'Ndrangheta even less probable. This is not only due to the apparent amateurism of the perpetrators, but also the simple fact that the 'Ndrangheta possesses an arsenal enough to destroy the whole of the city in a blink of an eye. Being unlikely that the 'Ndrangheta was actually involved with the bomb, it suggests that the answer lies elsewhere. People suspect that due to the imminent regional elections in March 2010, the act is destined to disperse the real political focus away from the political targets and towards violence. These types of diversion are not perceived by the citizens of Reggio Calabria as peculiar or casual events since the state is usually portrayed by the mainstream Calabrian subject as a suspicious agent. Whatever the truth may be, and only a few people may know it, the event had the opposite effect. To be sure, a considerable part of the intelligencia of Reggio Calabria expressed their discomfort with acts like this. Paradoxically, the violence that ought to be communicated from the event does not seem to be directed at the 'Ndrangheta. On the contrary, the violence is perceived to be from the state's side in the sense that the 'common sense' of the mainstream people of Reggio is violated.

Communicating violence – as the portrayal of the attack in the media suggests – and perceiving violence – as the event is interpreted by the everyday person – are then two different things which highlight the relative nature of violence. As Robert Layton (2006:173) has convincingly argued, 'violence is not inevitable, not an uncontrollable genetically programmed trait inherited from the common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees, but a response to particular conditions of the ecology of society'. Socially disruptive actions then are not treated as lacking rationality, since any judgments are directed to their justification and not the actions per-se (Lukes 1982).

Gavin Weston (2008), in his study on *'Lynchings in Todos Santos Cuchumatán'* in rural Guatemala maintained that the genealogy of violence requires a layered exegesis that touches upon local as well as international levels. In the Calabrian case a consistent anti-partisan narrative of oppression and victimisation is positively cultivated amongst the Calabrians. I have experienced this negation on many discursive levels. Citizens of Reggio Calabria usually complain that the colonisation of Africa by Mussolini should have also included Calabria, thus bitterly implying that perhaps the colonised enjoys more privileges and recognition than the coloniser. The narrative of opposition is played out on many levels; the intellectual for one, where irreversible bleak images have perpetually located Calabrians in a kind of bio-socio-economic twilight zone. Since the unification of Italy in 1860 south Italian societies have been trifled with and at the same time left out of any considerable developments – especially economic ones – that have taken place within the Italian state. Calabrian intellectuals attempted to shift the tension away from the portrayal of a malformed south Italian society by offering historical, ethnological and political accounts from within the south. These accounts, especially after 1980, have offered fresh conceptualisations as to why anti-partisan opposition is so strong in these societies.

Nevertheless, and on this point I agree with Mauro Francesco Minervino (2008), more recent accounts published by authors with little knowledge and, I would add, even less understanding of the Italian south, try to persuade their readers that mafia in south Italy is eradicated and thus these lands are 'safe' for other Europeans to visit. Anyone who has a minimum amount of knowledge on the issue knows very well that this is not the case. By pointing out the 'absence' of mafia one is perplexed as to why that should be necessary in the first place. In simple terms, why should the author go to such pains to argue that something does not exist if indeed it does not? In my fieldwork experience in Reggio Calabria, 'Ndrangheta is a kinship mode of social organisation which poses relatedness at the core of its conceptualisation. It is further to be understood as a sovereignty similarly to the Italian state and the Church. The fact that 'Ndrangheta is a successful – though not conventional – mode of social organisation makes its appropriation in cases of blame very handy. However, a contradiction is apparent. If the 'Ndrangheta is at once represented as a distraction technique at pre-election time and as an 'eradicated' group – as some Italian scholars would have it – then the blame cannot be simply cast towards the one direction ('Ndrangheta) or the other (state).

The issue of violence, contrary to assumptions that propagate it, escapes the mafia. In his influential paper *'Banditry, Myth and Terror in Cyprus and Other Mediterranean Societies'*, Paul Sant Cassia (1993) has argued that particular myths that adorn actions of violence are necessary in order to legitimise and naturalise the acts themselves. The seeds of this legitimisation are usually to be found at the grassroots which up to a point explain why these myths are significant in building national or regional rhetorics. In the case of Reggio Calabria I would like to invert the analogy. I would like to point out that 'Ndrangheta has become a polysemic symbol perpetuated equally in both pro-state and anti-state discourses. Violence then is a more complex issue whose production and appropriation involves a variety of actors (state, people, 'Ndrangheta) and their creative entanglements in various historical, political and economic levels.

I will argue then that the Italian state appropriates the symbol/'Ndrangheta in order to show its 'pro-people' action and care. The citizens of Reggio Calabria, on their part, are appropriating the symbol/'Ndrangheta in order to articulate their – historically explained – discomfort with governmental decision making processes. News statements like the ones reported at the beginning of this paper where *the state is going to strongly oppose the 'Ndrangheta* are considered at least comical in Reggio Calabria. Since the roots of the 'embracement' between governmental representatives, local politicians, clerics and the 'Ndrangheta is well documented (see in particular Stajano 1979, Williams 2003, Walston 1988) and for the citizens themselves well testified, it is futile to cast the notion of violence in either direction for all the implicated actors are well acquainted with any long-standing narratives of violence. I would like then to close this short article by noting that whilst the notion of violence should require a careful and ever contextual approach, its appropriation, by a variety of actors (the state and the mainstream people included) is ever more liberal and, in Italy at least, transcends any local or national level.

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